Jihadist expansion across borderlands in the Sahel

26 APRIL 2026

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Jihadist expansion

Over the past year, jihadist groups JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) and ISSP (Islamic State – Sahel Province) have been increasingly expanding out of their traditional strongholds in the Sahel region to spread south and infiltrate Nigeria and the northernmost areas of West African littoral countries such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Ivory Coast.

This expansion illustrates a shift in their strategy. By entering a new phase marked by entrenchment and the transformation of coastal border regions into a flashpoint of violence, these groups seek to access new sources of

revenue and strengthen cross-border corridors to streamline the movement of weapons, fighters and illicit funds.

However, the jihadist threat in the region is not only defined by geographic expansion; violent actions are taking on new characteristics as Sahelian militants reach for technological diversification to increasingly broadcast their footprint. This combination of growing lethality and continued spread poses great risks to civilian populations in the regions concerned.

Particularly, economic warfare has become a defining feature of the strategy employed by the two groups, as demonstrated by the fuel blockade imposed on Mali's capital Bamako by JNIM in the last months of 2025 and the attacks carried out against the Benin-Niger oil pipeline along the border with Nigeria by ISSP earlier the same year.

Deterioration of security and exacerbation of already dire humanitarian conditions in the Sahel region were facilitated by a series of successful coups completed between 2021 and 2023 in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, now all under the control of military juntas. Additionally, regional cooperation and cross-border control and coordination have been hampered after all three states withdrew from ECOWAS in 2025.

JNIM and ISSP, respectively the regional affiliates of the transnational terrorist organisations al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, are former allies currently engaged in a deadly inter-jihadist war which began in early 2020. As these groups battle over territorial control, they often target communities perceived as supporters of the enemy, resulting in severe consequences for civilians.

Data indicates that economic necessity and security concerns are major drivers of recruitment for terrorist groups in West Africa; ideological commitment, instead, seems to play a secondary role. Jihadist entrenchment in the borderlands is sustained by local grievances with roots in underlying conditions unlikely to be reversed in the near term such as political fragility, environmental degradation, and worsening socio-economic conditions. Where governments historically struggle to provide economic opportunities, basic services and infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, jihadist groups offer a way to secure both income and protection. As a result, early mobilisation efforts often target residents of areas affected by farmer-herder conflicts, where members of local communities are offered training and weapons by militant groups. The northern areas of many of the region's coastal countries hence offer fertile ground for terrorist groups looking to recruit, as they are sparsely populated and underdeveloped, and therefore facilitate the exploitation of the youth's frustration and sense of neglect.

In the initial phase of asserting its control on local populations, JNIM seeks to eliminate symbols of state presence and undermine local government's authority by targeting military bases and camps, local police and gendarmerie stations, mayor's offices, and other state institutions. It does so to create a power vacuum and pave the way for establishing its own

proto-governance structures. To advance its objectives, the group collects revenues through a wide array of lucrative activities which allow it to control economic flows both as a lever of power and as a tool for funding: taxes on transport and trade, ransom, patronage fees from local businesses, looting, and engaging in artisanal mining. In particular, the exploitation of gold fields, agricultural corridors, and transit points in parts of the Sahel region is a central part of its financial and strategic operations.

Similarly, ISSP primarily finances its operations through local criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and theft, and imposing 'zakat' (religious taxes) on local communities. It also receives funds from the Nigeria-based Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) often utilising unregulated hawala financial systems, a traditional person-to-person exchange.

Recent attacks by Sahelian jihadist groups targeting Benin, Nigeria, and Niger's capital confirm their intent to expand their reach into coastal West Africa. Borderlands host key transit hubs and supply routes which serve militant-held regions in the neighbouring countries; controlling these areas thereby constitutes a primary objective for both JNIM and ISSP, which seek to control illicit trade routes – fuel smuggling ones especially – connecting northwestern and north-central Nigeria with riverine communes in Niger and Benin. In this context, active support from local boat operators plays a major role in smuggling and militant mobility, and jihadist groups obtain it by ensuring local communities and traders along these routes are entirely dependent on access, taxation, and protection arrangements they provide.

Between June and November 2025, JNIM claimed a series of attacks along the Benin-Nigeria border. On 29 October, 2025, the group claimed its first small-stake attack on Nigerian soil, in the north central state of Kwara, broadcasting its presence where its activity had previously been suspected but less overt. The group had already indicated its intention to set up a brigade in Nigeria, an economic powerhouse and major oil and gas producer and exporter, in June; establishing a footprint in the Kwara region by exploiting its porous borders, the group could expand across other neighbouring states close to the Federal Capital Territory.

On 4 and 7 March, the group launched large-scale attacks on Beninese military bases as part of a regionwide offensive launched in early February after the defection of Sadou Samahouna, a former JNIM commander, to ISSP.

ISSP, on the other hand, began to signal its presence in the region by publicly claiming attacks in the Niger-Nigeria borderlands between December 2025 and February 2026. On 29 January 2026, it targeted Niger 's capital Niamey's airport, all the while intensifying its violent campaign against military and security forces across the country.

JNIM and ISSP have also increasingly publicised their activity in borderland regions. For terrorist groups, operating clandestinely limits public exposure and complicates threat assessment. However, signalling territorial

presence shapes the public perception of control and clarifies who operates in each area. As expansion efforts and competition between the two groups increased, they have shifted from a strategy of covert presence and deliberate attribution confusion to a communication-oriented approach, in an effort to tighten their control on communities, deter cooperation with authorities, and signal presence and intent to their rival. This demonstrates both militias are positioning themselves to maintain their presence and influence in the tri-state border region. Should this pattern be confirmed, violence will intensify, jihadist presence in rural areas will consolidate, and pressure on nearby population centres will increase.

The political upheavals witnessed by the Sahel region before 2023 led to a shift in international partnerships and to the disruption of the potential for sustainable, coordinated regional responses. Additionally, the decision to terminate the peacekeeping mission MINUSMA by Malian authorities created a vacuum quickly exploited by jihadist forces. At the present time, the burden of counterterrorism weighs heavily on regional forces, which have struggled to achieve a cohesive line of action against jihadism in the past due to insufficient logistics and coordination.

In 2024, the governments of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso established the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) in the attempt to boost regional cooperation and counterterrorism efforts. On 21 January 2025, a joint armed force of approximately 5,000 soldiers was created, and in December of the same year the Alliance launched a new unified force (AES Unified Force).

This experiment builds on the prior peace-building experience of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, established in 2017 to address current and emerging security challenges, and which included troops from Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad, before being disbanded in 2023. Among its major constraints were logistical challenges, limited operational capacity, and a lack of diversification of funding sources, which left Sahel states overly dependent on France and its Operation Barkhane. The AES Unified Force is supported financially by Burkina Faso's Patriotic Support Fund, Niger's Solidarity Fund for the Safeguarding of the Homeland, and Mali's Support Fund for Basic Infrastructure and Social Development Projects, to avoid excessive reliance on a single external country for support. Moreover, while the G5 force's battalions' operational radius was limited to 100-kilometres on either side of national borders, the AES force intends to operate across all three countries.

Nevertheless, resources and logistics will not suffice to effectively curb the spillover of terrorism. Intelligence sharing between central Sahel states and the rest of West Africa has so far been minimal, and the erosion of multilateral information-sharing platforms in favour of bilateral partnerships with China and Russia has further fragmented Sahelian intelligence networks. Timely and effective information sharing and joint intelligence analysis will be instrumental in the fight against jihadism.

Most importantly, the AES Unified Force's performance will depend on the integration of regional operational autonomy with national security structures, as well as cross-border cooperation with the armies of neighbouring states. As mentioned above, the control of borders with Nigeria, Benin, Ivory Coast, Togo, and Ghana is vital to armed groups as they seek to streamline illicit trade routes and smuggling of operational resources. While the AES force benefits from political alignment and close coordination between the juntas of the founding states, strained relations between Benin and Niger and between Niger and Nigeria have constituted a major pitfall of international Sahel interventions of the past decade, slowing down coordinated security efforts.

The future stability of borderlands is thus heavily dependent upon improvements in the field of military and security cooperation. In this regard, the three countries could draw a lesson from the Exercise Tarha Nakal which, in May 2024, witnessed the armed forces of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Togo efficiently pool their resources and coordinate operations; on a diplomatic level, on the other hand, the African Union is well positioned to ease tensions between AES countries and West African states in the Gulf of Guinea and promote collaboration between the AES Unified Force and ECOWAS's anti-terrorism force.

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